

# Anglo-Ashanti wars

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The **Anglo-Ashanti Wars** were five conflicts between the Ashanti Empire, in the Akan interior of the Gold Coast, now Ghana, and the invading British Empire in the 19th century between 1824 and 1901. The ruler of the Ashanti (or Asante) was the Asantehene. The wars were mainly over the Ashanti establishing strong control over the coastal areas of what is now Ghana. Coastal peoples, such as the Fante and the inhabitants of Accra, who were chiefly Ga, came to rely on British protection against Ashanti incursions.

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## Earlier wars

The British were drawn into three earlier wars:

### Anglo-Ashanti wars

Part of the Scramble for Africa










Ashantee captain in war dress, c. 1834

<b>Date</b>	1823-1900
<b>Location</b>	Ashanti Empire
<b>Result</b>	British victory Ashanti Empire becomes part of the Gold Coast






#### Belligerents

 British Empire	 Ashanti Empire
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#### Commanders and leaders

 George IV	Osei Bonsu
 William IV	Osei Yaw Akoto
 Victoria	Kwaku Dua I Panyin
 Alexander Gordon Laing	Kofi Karikari
 Charles MacCarthy	Mensa Bonsu
 †	Kwaku Dua II
 Garnet Wolseley	Prempeh I (POW)

#### Strength

1st -  11,000	1st - 20,000
3rd -  2,500	
4th -  2,200	5th -  Ashanti
5th -  2,500	Empire ~12,000

In the Ashanti-Fante War of 1806–07, the British refused to hand over two rebels pursued by the Ashanti, but eventually handed one over (the other escaped).






In the Ga-Fante War of 1811, the Akwapim captured a British fort at Tantamkweri and a Dutch fort at Apam.

In the Ashanti-Akim-Akwapim War of 1814–16 the Ashanti defeated the Akim-Akwapim alliance. Local British, Dutch, and Danish authorities all had to come to terms with the Ashanti. By 1817, the Ashanti, who had an army of 20,000 had become the strongest power in West Africa,<sup>[1]</sup> so the (British) African Company of Merchants signed a treaty of friendship that recognized Ashanti claims to sovereignty over much of the coast. The African Company of Merchants was dissolved in 1821 and the British assumed control of the Gold Coast.<sup>[1]</sup>

## First Anglo-Ashanti War

The Ashanti were not happy with the British as regards slavery, a highly profitable trade of the Ashanti and one that the British wished to abolish in the region. Economic and social friction played their part in the causes for the outbreak of violence.<sup>[1]</sup> A small British group were led into a trap which resulted in 10 killed, 39 wounded and a British retreat. The Ashanti tried to negotiate but Sir Charles MacCarthy, rejecting Ashanti claims to Fanti areas of the coast and resisting overtures by the Ashanti to negotiate, so started the First Anglo-Ashanti War which would run until 1831. MacCarthy led an invading force from the Cape Coast, two columns set out, the governor was in the first, smaller group of 500 and was in the jungle and out of touch with the second column of 2,500 on 22 January 1824 when the Ashanti army of 10,000 attacked. With no time to prepare, the group suffered losses and ran out of ammunition, some of the boxes were found to contain macaroni rather than powder and bullets. MacCarthy was wounded and rather than be taken prisoner, shot himself. The force that was overrun at the Battle of Nsamankow suffering 60% casualties. MacCarthy was beheaded and his heart was eaten.<sup>[2]</sup> The heads of MacCarthy and Ensign Wetherall were kept as trophies. Major Alexander Gordon Laing returned to Britain with news of their fate. The Ashanti swept down to the coast, but disease forced them back.

The new governor, Hope Smith started to gather a new army, mainly comprising natives, including Denkyiras, many of the traditional enemies of the Ashanti. In August 1826 the governor heard that the Ashanti were planning on attacking Accra. A defensive position was prepared on the open plain 10 miles (16 km) north of Accra and the 11,000 men waited.<sup>[3]</sup> On 7 August the Ashanti army appeared and attacked the centre where the best troops were held, some Marines, the militia and a battery of Congreve rockets. It dissolved into hand-to-hand fighting but the Ashanti force were not doing well on their flanks whilst they

Casualties and losses			
1st -		unknown	1st - over 2,000
3rd -		18 killed and 185 wounded	3rd - unknown
4th -		0	4th - 0
5th -		1,007	5th -  Ashanti Empire ~2,000



looked like winning in the centre. Then the rockets were fired.<sup>[1]</sup> The novelty of the weapons, the explosions, rocket trails, and grievous wounds caused by flying metal shards caused the Ashanti to fall back. Soon they fled leaving thousands of casualties on the field.<sup>[4]</sup>

The war was effectively over. In 1831, the Pra River was accepted as the border in a treaty, and there were thirty years of peace.

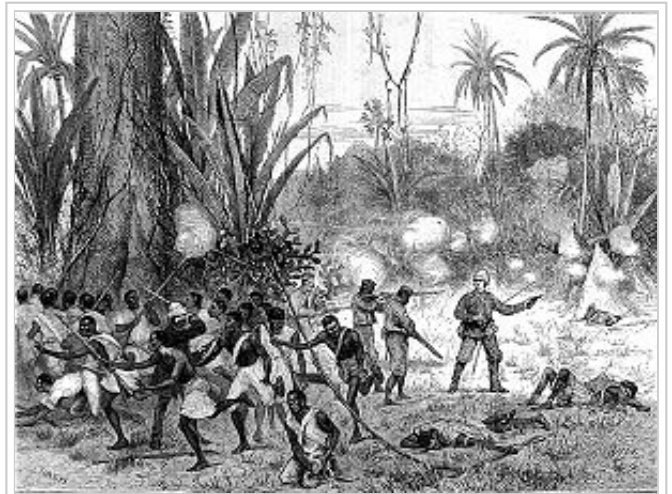
## Second Anglo-Ashanti War

Then, in 1863, a large Ashanti delegation crossed the river pursuing a fugitive, Kwesi Gyana. There was fighting, with casualties on both sides, but the governor's request for troops from England was declined and sickness forced the withdrawal of his troops.

## Third Anglo-Ashanti War

The Third Anglo-Ashanti War, also known as the "First Ashanti Expedition", lasted from 1873 to 1874. In 1869, a German missionary family and a Swiss missionary had been taken from Togo to Kumasi. They were still being held in 1873.<sup>[5]</sup>

The British Gold Coast, was formerly established in 1867 and in 1872, Britain expanded their territory when they purchased the Dutch Gold Coast from the Dutch, including Elmina which was claimed by the Ashanti. The Dutch had signed the Treaty of Butre in 1656 with the Ahanta. The treaty's arrangements proved very stable and regulated Dutch-Ahanta diplomatic affairs for more than 213 years. This all changed with the sale of the Dutch Gold Coast. The Ashanti invaded the new British protectorate.



A bush fight, Third Anglo-Ashanti War. *The Graphic* 1874

General Garnet Wolseley with 2,500 British troops and several thousand West Indian and African troops (including some Fante) was sent against the Ashanti, and subsequently became a household name in Britain. The war was covered by war correspondents, including Henry Morton Stanley and G. A. Henty. Military and medical instructions were printed for the troops.<sup>[6]</sup> The British government refused appeals to interfere with British armaments manufacturers who sold to both sides.<sup>[7]</sup>

### Road

Wolseley was appointed on 13 August 1873<sup>[1]</sup> and went to the Gold Coast to make his plans before the arrival of his troops in January 1874. On 27 September, 1873 a team of Royal Engineers landed at Cape Coast Castle. Their job was to expand the single file track that led to Coomassie, 160 miles (260 km) away into a road that was suitable for troop movements. At the end of each days march, roughly every 10 miles (16 km) a fortified camp would be built with 70 feet (21 m) long huts inside a stockade in an area that had been cleared of trees and undergrowth to provide some protection against hostile natives.<sup>[8]</sup>



The 1874 burning of Kumasi

Bridges need to be built across streams using trees, bamboos and creepers for ropes and a major bridge across the 63 yards (58 m) River Prah which used pre manufactured pieces brought from Chatham, England. In total 237 bridges would be built. Some of the camps were larger, such as at Prahsue, next to the bridge, with a medical hut and a tower on a mound, stores, forge, telegraph office and post office.<sup>[9]</sup> It was stocked with 400 tons of food and 1.1m rounds of ammunition.<sup>[10]</sup> The labour was supplied locally, to start with the men did not know how to use European tools and were liable to vanish into the forest if they heard a rumour that the Ashanti were nearby. Sickness, despite taking quinine daily, claimed

the European engineers. Even so, the road progressed. By 24 January Prahsue was reached with the telegraph line.<sup>[11]</sup>

The first troops arrived in late December and from 1 January 1874 started marching along the road to the front, half a Battalion at a time.<sup>[12]</sup> The troops comprised a Battalion from each of the Black Watch, Rifle Brigade and Royal Welsh Fusiliers. 1st and 2nd West Indian Regt. A Naval Brigade, two native regiments, Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers and Royal Marines.<sup>[13]</sup> By 29 January, the road was more than half completed and they were close to Ashanti outposts. Skirmishing between the two forces had begun. Wolseley prepared to fight a battle.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Battle

The Battle of Amoaful was fought on 31 January. A road was cut to the village and the Black Watch led the way, forming square in the clearing with the Rifle Brigade, whilst flanking columns moved around the village. With the pipes playing 'The Campbells Are Coming' the Black Watch charged with bayonets and the shocked Ashantis fled. The flank columns were slow moving in the jungle and the Ashantis moved around them, in their normal horseshoe formation and attacked the camp 2 miles (3.2 km) to the rear, the Royal Engineers defended themselves until relieved by the Rifle Brigade. Although there was another small battle, two days later, the Battle of Ordashu, the action had been decisive and the route to Kumasi was open.<sup>[15]</sup> There were 3 killed and 165 wounded Europeans, 1 killed and 29 African troops wounded.<sup>[16]</sup>

The capital, Kumasi, was abandoned by the Ashanti when the British moved the last 15 miles in column arriving on 4 February and was briefly occupied by the British. They demolished the royal palace with explosives, leaving Kumasi a heap of smouldering ruins.<sup>[16]</sup> The British were impressed by the size of the palace and the scope of its contents, including "rows of books in many languages."<sup>[17]</sup>

The Asantahene, the ruler of the Ashanti, after being threatened with being chased further north, signed a harsh British treaty, the Treaty of Fomena in July 1874, to end the war. Among articles of the treaty between H.M. Queen Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland and H.M. Kofi Karikari, King of Ashanti were that "The King of Ashanti promises to pay the sum of 50,000 ounces of approved gold as indemnity for the expenses he has occasioned to Her Majesty the Queen of England by the late war..." The treaty also required an end to human sacrifice<sup>[5]</sup> and stated that "There shall be freedom of trade between Ashanti and Her Majesty's forts on the [Gold] Coast, all persons being at liberty to carry their merchandise from the Coast to Kumasi, or from that place to any of Her Majesty's possessions on the Coast." Furthermore, the treaty stated that "The King of Ashanti guarantees that the road from Kumasi to the River Pra shall always



be kept open..."<sup>[18]</sup> Wolseley completed the campaign in two months, and re-embarked then for home before the unhealthy season began.

Wolseley was promoted and showered with honours. British casualties were 18 dead from combat and 55 from disease, with 185 wounded.<sup>[16]</sup> It was good that the war finished so quickly as 70% of troops succumbed to sickness.<sup>[5]</sup>

Some British accounts pay tribute to the hard fighting of the Ashanti at Amoafu, particularly the tactical insight of their commander, Amanquatia: "The great Chief Amanquatia was among the killed [...] Admirable skill was shown in the position selected by Amanquatia, and the determination and generalship he displayed in the defence fully bore out his great reputation as an able tactician and gallant soldier."<sup>[19]</sup>



Wounded soldiers being conveyed to hospital ships

The campaign is also notable for the first recorded instance of a traction engine being employed on active service. Steam sapper number 8 (made by Aveling and Porter) was shipped out and assembled at Cape Coast Castle. As a traction engine it had limited success hauling heavy loads up the beach, but gave good service when employed as a stationary engine driving a large circular saw.<sup>[20]</sup>

Before the 1873 war, Wolseley had campaigned for a more comfortable clothing for hot climates and in this war had managed to get his troops kitted out in a better uniform.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Fourth Anglo-Ashanti War

The Fourth Anglo-Ashanti War, also known as the "Second Ashanti Expedition", was brief, lasting only from December 1895 to February 1896. The Ashanti turned down an unofficial offer to become a British protectorate in 1891, extending to 1894. The British also wanted to establish a British resident in Kumasi. The Ashanti King Prempeh refused to surrender his sovereignty.<sup>[22]</sup> Wanting to keep French and German forces out of Ashanti territory (and its gold), the British were anxious to conquer the Ashanti once and for all. The Ashanti sent a delegation to London offering concessions on its gold, cocoa and rubber trade as well as submission to the crown. The British however had already made its mind up on a military solution,<sup>[1]</sup> they were on their way, the delegation only returning to Kumasi a few days before the troops marched in.<sup>[23]</sup>

Colonel Sir Francis Scott left Cape Coast with the main expeditionary force of British and West Indian troops, Maxim guns and 75mm artillery in December 1895, and travelling along the remnants of the 1874 road arrived in Kumasi in January 1896.<sup>[1]</sup> Major Robert Baden-Powell led a native levy of several local tribes in the campaign. The Asantehene directed the Ashanti not to resist, but casualties from sickness among the British troops were high.<sup>[24]</sup> Soon, Governor William Maxwell arrived in Kumasi as well. Asantehene Agyeman Prempeh was unable or unwilling to pay the 50,000 ounces of gold so was arrested and deposed.<sup>[1]</sup> He was forced to sign a treaty of protection, and with other Ashanti leaders was sent into exile in the Seychelles.

Baden-Powell published a diary of life giving the reasons, as he saw them, for the war: To put an end to human sacrifice. To put a stop to slave-trading and raiding. To ensure peace and security for the neighbouring tribes. To settle the country and protect the development of trade. To get paid up the balance of the war indemnity. He also believed that if a smaller force had been sent, there would have been bloodshed.<sup>[23]</sup>

The British force left Kumasi on 22 January 1896, arriving back at the coast two weeks later. Not a shot had been fired but 18 Europeans were dead and 50% of the troops were sick. Among the dead was Queen Victoria's son-in-law, Prince Henry of Battenberg,<sup>[1]</sup> who was taken ill before getting to Kumasi and died on 20 January onboard ship, returning to England. In 1897 Ashanti territory became a British protectorate.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Fifth War or "War of the Golden Stool"

Technology was reaching the Gold Coast, a railway to Kumasi was started in 1898 but had not progressed far when another war broke out. The railway was to be completed in 1903.<sup>[25]</sup>



Map from 1896 of the British Gold Coast Colony showing Ashanti

In the War of the Golden Stool (1900), also known as the "Third Ashanti Expedition", on 25 March 1900, the British representative, Sir Frederick Mitchell Hodgson committed a political error by insisting he should sit on the Golden Stool, not understanding it was the Royal throne and very sacred to the Ashanti.<sup>[26]</sup> He ordered a search be made for it. The Ashanti, enraged by this act, attacked the soldiers engaged in the search.

The British retreated to a small stockade, 50 yards (46 m) square with 12 feet (3.7 m) loopholed high stone walls and firing turrets at each corner,<sup>[27]</sup> where 8 Europeans, dozens of mixed-race colonial administrators, and 500 Nigerian Hausas with six small field guns and four Maxim guns defended themselves. The British detained several high ranking leaders in the fort.<sup>[27]</sup> The stockade was besieged, and the telegraph wires cut. A rescue party of 700 arrived in June, but with so many sick in the fort that could not be removed, the healthier men, Hodgson with his wife and 100 Hausas escaped, meeting up with the rescue party, they managing to avoid the 12,000 Ashanti warriors and make it back to the coast.<sup>[27]</sup>

On 14 July a second relief force of 1,000 made it to Kumasi having fought several engagements along the route, relieving the fort on the 15th when they only had a few days of supplies left. The remaining Ashanti court not exiled to the Seychelles, had mounted the offensive against the British and Fanti troops resident at the Kumasi Fort, but were defeated.

Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen-Mother of Ejisu, who had led the rebellion and other Ashanti leaders were also sent to the Seychelles. The Ashanti territories became part of the Gold Coast colony on 1 January 1902, on the condition that the Golden Stool not be violated by British or other non-Akan foreigners. The Ashanti claimed a victory as they had not lost their sacred stool.

In September the British sent flying columns out to visit neighbouring peoples who had supported the rebellion, resulting in a number of skirmishes.

The British and their allies suffered 1,007 fatalities in total. The Ashanti casualties are estimated to be around 2,000

The Ashanti flag depicts the sacred golden stool which was well hidden and only discovered by road workers by accident in 1920.

King Prempeh I returned from exile in 1924 travelling to Kumasi by a special train.

## Awards

Four awards were made of the Victoria Cross, for Gallantry in the period 1873-74 and two for the 1900 campaign. (see List of Victoria Cross recipients by campaign)

An Ashanti Medal was created for those involved in the War of the Golden Stool. This expedition lasted from March – September 1900. It was issued as a Silver or bronze Medal.

## Further reading

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## See also

- Ashanti Empire
- List of rulers of Asante
- British Empire
- History of Ghana
- Gold Coast (British colony)
- African military systems after 1800

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Yaa Asantewaa in *batakarikese* (ceremonial war dress) in an undated photograph.

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| Wars involving the United Kingdom | Wars involving the Ashanti Empire | History of Ghana  
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